

The Midland

A MAGAZINE OF THE MIDDLE WEST

VOL. VI

AUGUST, 1920

NO. 8

The Rubber-Tired Buggy

By WANDA I. FRAIKEN

Looking out over the waving green oats field, Rachel Morrison, standing in the kitchen window, saw a load of hay crawling up the road from the creek. This was the last load before supper, Ezra had shouted when the empty hay-rack had rattled past the house an hour before. She made preparations for the evening meal, from the pantry to the hot stove, from the table in the north window to the shelf half way down the steep cellar steps, on down to the cold cellar floor where the butter and the eggs were kept, back and forth from kitchen to dining-room, a circumscribed round repeated every day, like that of the sheep which worked the separator back of the barn.

When she could see the hired man's blue shirt on top of the hay, she began to slice the cold potatoes ready to fry. A moment later, Ezra, walking with a

stiff jerk that exposure to the freakish fancies of Wisconsin weather and sitting up in cold stables at night with sick horses had given him, and Howard, a little heavy-footed too, followed the hay-rack.

Ezra came first from the barn. She heard him drawing water at the pump and groaning as he splashed cold water over his face. He lumbered through the kitchen, a tall man, with piercing blue eyes and a commanding air in spite of his work-sagged shoulders and shabby clothes.

"Done with all the hay across the creek?" she asked him.

He merely grunted as he clattered into the dining room and threw himself on the floor in front of the door.

She left the potatoes hissing over the fire. "You'll catch cold layin' in the draft," she said from the doorway. "Go in to grandma's room an' lay on her couch." Grandma, Ezra's mother, still dominated the back parlor, which had been her bedroom after Ezra's marriage, even though she had died when Howard was a small boy.

Ezra untwisted his legs with a half-smothered oath. "Leave me alone. I'm too tired to move," he told her. "Oh Lord!" he groaned, his face twisted with pain, a ghastly white under the sunburn, "I'm no good. Worked out, I guess." Then seeing her anxious eyes upon him, he added, "Go'n an' tend to your supper."

Howard and Joe, the hired man, were laughing as they made their toilets at the back door.

"Ya as'ed her, didn't ya?" Rachel at the stove heard Joe say.

There was a scuffle and a shout. Rachel saw Howard throw a wash-basin of water over Joe's yellow hair. Joe, as sleek as a wet rooster, was still giggling when he came into the dining-room, but he stopped when he looked at Ezra.

"Come, Ezra," Rachel enjoined. "We're all ready. I'll help you up."

He rolled over, and ignoring the hand she held out, rose stiffly. At the table, he passed the dishes in front of him to Joe without helping himself. The meal was a silent one. Joe and Howard, eating steadily, exchanged a few eloquent grins, but that was all. When Howard finished, he pushed back his chair and waited until Joe had gone out to the shed for the milk pails.

"You won't let me take it then?" Howard said to his father. When he was not smiling, the boy had an ominous lower lip, contradicting the mischief of his eyes.

"Ain't the runabout good enough for you?"

"What we got a good top-buggy for?" Howard banged his chair against the table.

"I'm not goin' to have that rubber-tired buggy bouncin' over the road till all hours o' the night."

"We ain't had it out twice this summer," the boy went on. "Most o' the fellas around here got automobiles to ride in. I might at least have a decent lookin' buggy."

A terrible look came into Ezra's face. "You sure have taken good care of it," Rachel interposed

quickly. "It looks like new. I remember how proud I felt the first day you took me to town in it. That was the summer you was drivin' the black team."

"It ain't nothin' to your son. He wants an automobile." Ezra's voice was weak with rage.

"Now, Ezra, Howard didn't mean—he just wanted a good-lookin' outfit himself."

"Well, he ain't goin' to have it." He fixed an unwinking stare upon his wife, who said no more. "You better get to your milkin', young man."

Howard slammed the kitchen door after him.

"He wants to drive that Hanson girl down to the school-house," Ezra explained. "That wild one with the hair always in her eyes."

"There ain't many girls around here to choose from," she answered him. "I guess she's as good as the rest."

"She ain't good enough for my rubber-tired buggy."

"There ain't many that are, Ezra. You used it Decoration Day when we went to the cemetery. I ain't set foot in it since. When somebody dies or you take a notion to goin' to church in town."

Ezra went out on the porch to lie on the hard floor, his head propped up with the calico cushion from the porch rocker. Rachel sat at the table and drank another cup of tea.

"Rachel," Ezra called, "where's my corn-cob pipe?" She went on sipping her half-cold tea. "I guess it's down to the machine-shed where I was oilin' the old mower after dinner."

She began to pile the dishes in front of her. Then the habit of her married life asserted itself. "I'll go after it," she said. "I ain't fed the little chickens yet."

As she crossed the road, the chickens scratching in the dust came toddling toward her, wings and necks outstretched, but she left them huddled together, winking a little sadly after her. The small chicks, already tucked under maternal wings, began to tumble out of their coops. She fed them hurriedly, sitting down on a pile of boards nearby, to keep away the greedy roosters, already peering at her from around the side of the barn. Then she went on to the machine-shed, and felt along the beam where Ezra said he had left his pipe, but it was not there. Ezra's pipes never were where he thought he had left them.

Opening the small door of the hay-barn, she walked through the dim, sweet-smelling place, with the wisps of clover covering the floor. Frank, her driving horse, whinnied from his stall, but she did not notice him. In front of her stood the rubber-tired buggy, swathed in white canvas, a ghostly object in the twilight of the barn. When she squeezed past it, involuntarily her hand was clenched in a threatening attitude, as if it were something alive which she hated.

Going out the opposite door, she saw Howard emptying a pail of milk into the milk-can bobbing around in the watering trough. He stopped when he saw her.

"Your father's tired tonight," she began. "That why he acted so about the buggy. Your father ain't well, Howard. You mustn't get cross at him."

"It's always me he picks on. I'm tired of it."

"It ain't just the buggy. He don't like the notion — You know, Howard — she — that girl — she ain't as quiet as some —"

"She's all right. I guess that's my business — not his. I won't — I'm tired o' his treatin' me like —"

"He don't realize you're growed up. It's the same with me. I try, but you seem like a little boy to me, Howard."

"I told her I'd take her to the dance at the school-house, but I won't ask a girl to ride in that squeaky muddy old — Beggin' for that buggy. It's as much yours 'n' mine. Haven't we slaved here? I've stuck on this farm when other boys — I'd have got out long before if — But when he got sick —"

"You've been a good son."

"If he ever gave me a word o' praise for it. Driven early an' late. Just work."

"I know how 'tis."

He dumped the milk in the can, and pounded down the cover with a bang. Rachel turned away. She did not dare think of the wild notion which had suddenly taken possession of her. If Howard — But, no, he wouldn't do that.

When she went back to the house, Ezra was still stretched out on the porch floor.

"I couldn't find —" Rachel began. Then she noticed that Ezra was smoking his pipe.

"It was in my pocket," he confessed.

She sat down on the step to rest a moment. The night hawks had already gathered in the sky, turning and turning in monotonous circles and then swooping downward with raucous cries. The fireflies flitted helter-skelter over the oats field nearby. The fragrance of the blush roses around the front door was strong in the air. Beyond the barn and the stretches of meadow lay the Fox River, calm with the late sunlight still upon it. All the years of Rachel's married life it had been there, a familiar thing in the midst of all other familiar things, but somehow different, aloof from the labor and the ugliness of the farm and always beautiful.

Ezra let a long sigh escape him. "If I could get rid o' this place —" His voice was husky. "It's been one streak o' bad luck after another — When lightning struck the barn — all the crop gone and not enough insurance to put up a new one — That was bad enough. An' then hail an' drought — An' when frost took all the tomato and cabbage crop last fall that the canning factory had bargained to pay me a good price for —"

Rachel was silent. Almost daily now he went over the list of his misfortunes. "That's a fine lot o' hay you're puttin' up this year," she said at last, trying to encourage him.

He only grunted again. "I wish it was the last lot o' hay for me. If I sold this place — I — I'd set

— just set by the big tree down there by the river.” He pointed with a cramped hand to the huge cottonwood which marked the union of creek and river. “Just set an’ — I’m so tired. God knows how tired. Morning, noon, an’ night.”

“That’s no way to talk,” she reproved him. “You ain’t the only one that’s tired.”

Her voice sounded hard, but she didn’t dare sympathize too much with Ezra. He wasn’t well. She didn’t need doctors to tell her that. They said rest and change. And they collected bills for saying it. But Ezra had to work right along, his flesh falling away, the pallor under the sunburn giving his face an awful look.

She had meant to beg him to let Howard have the rubber-tired buggy. If she had found his pipe down at the barn, when she came back with it, she could have brought him around. She was the only one who could. But it was no time now. Suddenly she thought of the littered supper table, and going into the house, she started to carry the dishes to the kitchen. Ezra came in after her.

“I’m goin’ to doze off a little,” he explained as he went into his mother’s room. Lying on grandma’s couch was his admission that his pains had got the better of him.

“Shut that door,” he called when she made a clatter with the dishes. “I want a little quiet.”

Rachel closed the door, and while the sun sank unobserved in a crimson cloud behind the pines in the little woods on the other side of the railroad

track, she washed the dishes slowly. So it was the Hanson girl Howard wanted the rubber-tired buggy for. Rachel remembered her at the community picnic in the pine woods earlier in the summer, Chris Hanson's girl, handsome in a loud kind of way, with her high color and not unpleasing large features, but not the girl she would have selected for her boy. She had never had much to do with the neighbors back in the settlement, who were different from her, but she remembered now that Howard had always liked to go to their Sunday parties.

She had to light a lamp to finish the dishes. She was slow with everything, and her work was never finished. Years ago she had decided that since there was always work to do, it was just as well not to rush from one thing to another.

Howard finished milking earlier than usual, and went upstairs to his room. Half an hour later, he came down again, wearing his best blue serge suit that his mother had bought for him two years before. The sleeves were a little short, and he had to stand very straight to keep from straining the back of the coat.

"You goin' up to the Hanson place?" He nodded. "You might take the runabout this time."

He did not answer. On the way to the gate, he stopped in front of the rose bushes and picked a rose for his buttonhole. Then he whistled all the way out to the road. Rachel watched him proudly. There wasn't another boy on the river farms like him.

When Rachel threw her dishwater back of the

smoke-house, she thought she heard the pound of horses' hoofs on the road and the turning of wheels which didn't squeak like those of the old runabout. She did not look around, although by turning her head she could have watched a vehicle cross the stone bridge and ascend the hill. She went back into the kitchen, finished her work, and then seated herself in the big black rocking chair on the porch, swaying back and forth. Across the river, the lights in the convent and in the state reformatory, placed by some trick of fate close together, cast flickering torches of fire over the dark waters. Ezra slept on behind the closed door of the back parlor.

Finally, she heard him groping around in the dining-room. "You goin' to bed now?" she called.

"Ain't those men come in from milkin' yet?"

She pretended not to hear. She lighted the lamp in the dining-room while Ezra foraged in the pantry for something to eat.

Ezra did not seem in a hurry to go to bed. He ate some crackers and milk, he read in his farm journal, he sat out on the porch step watching an excursion boat pass by.

At last he went to bed and fell into a deep sleep. Rachel lay awake while the kitchen clock struck eleven, then twelve, one, two. Dogs barked on the next farm. A rooster crowed. Then the pound of horses' hoofs and the whirl of padded wheels broke the quiet of the night.

Ezra sat up in bed, wide-awake. Rachel breathed heavily, feigning sleep. The horse stopped nearby,

and then there was the sound of another quick, short trot. Ezra crawled cautiously from bed.

Rachel remained motionless, her arms and legs numb. She held her breath, afraid of what was coming. Ezra waited.

Some one was walking up the path toward the house whistling softly. The dining-room screen door groaned once, twice. Then Howard in his stocking feet crossed the dining-room floor and crept up the stairs. The third step creaked. Then there was silence.

Ezra came back to bed. He turned and tossed the rest of the night. But when it was already light, Rachel, even in her despair, slept. When she awoke, Ezra was gone.

Fortified by habit, she prepared the breakfast. The kitchen walls, a cold blue from repeated white-washings, seemed to be closing in upon her. The stove took on the threatening aspect of a hellish monster. She placed dishes uncertainly on the table.

When she saw Ezra and Joe coming from the barn, a hopeless strength enabled her to face Ezra when he came in. "Where's Howard?" she asked him.

"Asleep, I guess." Ezra's blue eyes, shining out of a gaunt, unshaven face, rested sharply upon her. "That's where a fella is when he's been out most o' the night before."

Rachel escaped into the pantry. If Ezra would only swear loud oaths and twist his face with rage, she would not be so afraid. She leaned against the

cupboard. And Howard — for that Hanson girl — a girl like that — with a silly laugh and untidy hair — he would bring all this trouble upon her.

The hired man had left the breakfast table when Howard in his overalls came into the dining-room.

"Why didn't you call me?" he asked his mother.

"Your mother thought you needed your sleep," Ezra answered for her.

"I thought you was to the barn," she said.

Ezra finished his breakfast. Howard took his seat next to his mother with careless unconcern. His face had lost its boyish look during the night. Howard had suddenly become a man. Rachel vaguely divined the change in one desperate, hurried glance.

"When you're through, I want to speak with you, young man," Ezra began.

"Very well, father," Howard agreed cheerfully.

Howard ate two fried eggs and three slices of fried salt pork. He asked for a second cup of coffee. All the time his father waited, leaning on the table, one hand partly hiding his face.

When Rachel could bear it no longer, she began to clear the dishes off the table. She was in the kitchen when the storm broke. She had never dreamed that when the end came — that inevitable end which she had fought against since Howard's babyhood — two strong wills — father and son rising up against each other — that it would be like this. Standing near the door, she heard and saw it all — the terrible words of the father, fiery, broken, like Ezra himself — the bitter, determined words of

the son. And then she saw Howard tumble out of his chair, confronting his father, with an expression on his face that she would never forget. "I'm through with all this," he said. "I'm going. And I'll never come back."

Rachel started to go to her boy, to tell him that where he went she would go, but instead she turned and fled out the back door, stumbling among the dew-soaked weeds, running blindly like a crazy thing across the morning shadows.

Out in the orchard, where green apples with red spots weighed down the trees and ripening cherries attracted an orchestra of birds, she wandered, her dress wet to her knees, crying aloud, beating her hands together. She had only one child — her blue-eyed baby. All the work — the loneliness — Ezra's temper — If it hadn't been for Howard —

She staggered back toward the house as Ezra was leaving, his head forward, bent like an old man. She entered the dining-room, but Howard was not there. She hurried into the hall, her footsteps echoing on the bare painted floor. Up the steps she went, breathless.

Howard's door was open. Howard stood in front of it, dressed in the tight blue clothes. His overalls and his flannel shirt lay in a heap on the floor.

He began throwing his meagre possessions into an oilcloth suitcase. Mechanically she helped him, and together they closed the clumsy fastenings.

He was ready to go. "It was bound to happen, mother," he said when he kissed her. "I couldn't help it."

She patted his cheek. "An' — an' me —"

"I'm not goin' far — not now. I'll try to get a job in town first. An' if I don't, there's plenty o' farmers around here that 'd keep me through harvestin' an' threshin'."

Before she let him go, she couldn't help but say, not in reproach but in awed wonder, "An' you'd do all this — for — for her —"

"It wasn't that."

She knew it wasn't, not the Hanson girl nor the rubber-tired buggy.

She made him take the butter and egg money she had been saving for a refrigerator. He didn't want to take it, but she told him it would make her feel better. Then she kissed him, a hurried peek not very close to his lips, and he was gone.

Rachel stood in the middle of the room Howard had left. The carpet, made of the rags she had sewed during long winter evenings, Mrs. Poquette on the next farm had woven for her. The carpet was bright and new when Howard was twelve years old. In the corner near the south window stood the cheap oak book-case she had bought him out of her scanty means. The shelves were filled with red, blue, and green books, the detective stories and tales of high adventure his mother had selected to render long winter evenings tolerable. Now that Howard was embarked on an adventure all his own, he did not need them any more. She had tried to keep him contented on the farm, but he had gone.

As she went downstairs, pausing on each step, she

came with every step nearer to her decision. At the bottom she had made up her mind. She was going to Howard. To-day, to-morrow. As she stood in the dining-room door, the rose petals lay scattered over the porch steps, the bees were buzzing over the clover blossoms, and the sun made silvery patches on the river. Far up on the hill past the school-house, Rachel saw a dark spot moving on and on in the dust. Howard was walking swiftly toward town.

She went into her bedroom and latched the door. In the blurred mirror of the black-walnut bureau, she caught a glimpse of her disordered hair. Then she stopped suddenly. There was a wild look in her eyes that frightened her.

She looked around the little room, the cell of a bedroom off the dining-room and over the clammy cellar, hot in summer and cold in winter. When Ezra's father died, Ezra's mother had moved into the back parlor and bought herself a set of golden-oak furniture which Rachel as a bride had secretly envied. Old Mrs. Morrison had left the heavy black-walnut furniture where it stood, and Rachel, as Ezra's wife, had inherited it. She had suggested to Ezra that they keep the front room upstairs, but this cramped space, with a flowering currant bush crowding against the single window, Ezra thought proper for the master and the mistress of the house. He was set in his ways even then.

On top of the bureau, some towels that Rachel had ironed the day before, Ezra's revolver, seldom loaded, some stockings to be mended, lay in a con-

fused heap. On a chair nearby were Ezra's best trousers and the coat he had worn when he drove to town the last time. His shoes sprawled over the floor.

Rachel sat on the edge of the bed, her hands clutched together. The straw under the carpet sent forth a sickening smell. Even in early morning the place was hot and close.

She stared around her dully, all of her married life associated with these four dingy walls confronting her like a vivid dream.

During that first year after she married Ezra, they had saved all their caresses for the time when, behind the door, closed as it was now, they were secure from the spying eyes of Ezra's mother, who had little patience with lovers' foolishness. Here Howard had been born after she had been married three years and the neighbors had almost persuaded her that she was never going to have a baby. This was the same room where she had lain in the big dark bed with her baby through the long, peaceful days, with Ezra and his mother coming in often to see how she was.

Only after all the horses were sold and Ezra worked early and late in the fields did things seem to change. It was then that she began coming to this stuffy little room, shutting the door and staying all by herself, until Ezra came and promised to do better. And then it would happen all over — his fits of anger, his harshness with Howard, the torrent of oaths that were like volcanic fire to her. He never

swore at her. Even now, when she was done pitying him, she remembered he had spared her. But it had been too hard.

She remembered the last time. It was during a spell of sudden heat in late May. Howard had been sent to town to get some machinery repaired. His father had told him to be back by noon. When he returned at five o'clock with the excuse that he had had to wait his turn, Ezra had refused to believe him, he had talked to Howard as if he were a dog, and only the pleading of his mother had made Howard hold his tongue. And afterward, she had come to the back bedroom, hot like an oven, to throw herself on the bed. She could not get any supper for the men that night. They had found something by themselves. But when Howard and Joe were at the barn milking, Ezra had brought her some tea and some half-burned toast and had promised that he would never talk to Howard that way again.

And now Howard was gone.

She rose stiffly from the bed. In back of the long closet there was an old valise for a few clothes. She fumbled through the rows of garments hanging on the pegs and brought it out. Ezra and she had carried it with them to the city the year the blacks, Elsie and Stella, had taken the first prize at the state fair. Howard had stayed at home with his grandmother.

Unexpectedly, she faced her mother-in-law, in her wide-skirted, ringleted youth, looking down from the wall with disapproval upon the disorder below.

That alone had been the bone of contention between them. If Rachel was going away, she must straighten this room first. And the unwashed dishes — She hadn't fed the chickens. When everything was done, she would drive to town and find Howard. She could work too. When had she done anything else? And they would be together.

With desperate swiftness, the dishes were washed, the floors swept, the rooms put in order. Then Rachel went to the barn to feed the little chickens. She had all her plans made now. She would get the men their dinner and then she would walk to town. She could write to Ezra from there that she wasn't coming back.

Out in the barnyard she fed the little chickens for the last time. The old roosters kept coming up to eat the feed, and she had to chase them away again and again. To-morrow they could do as they pleased.

When the downy bundles of appetite had peeped over the last crumb and were trailing off in the weeds for bugs, she went on to the barn to see her old Frank. Frank whinnied when he saw her, stretching his white nose over his manger for her to pat. She put her arm around his neck. She had been the first to drive him after Ezra had broken him in to the harness. He was an old horse now. No one drove him but her. She gave him some oats, but he let them fall in the manger and went on rubbing his funny old nose against her face.

Beside them, so close that the canvas brushed

against her, was the rubber-tired buggy, the cause of all her misery. Twenty years before, when she was a bride and the rubber-tired buggy was new — how everything dated from the rubber-tired buggy — she remembered how she drove in it with Ezra behind his spirited colts, morning and afternoon, a neighbor's girl and Ezra's mother in the kitchen, and when the horses pranced, she clung to Ezra's arm, and he —

If she could only forget some of the years, going away would be easier. If she hated Ezra now, she had loved him once. When she had taken him away from all the envious girls, her big, commanding lover with the broad shoulders and the blue eyes like Howard's, he had a violent temper even then. His mother had warned her. They had had their lovers' quarrels too. But afterward — His love had been as violent as his temper, and she always forgave him.

She leaned against the shaft of the buggy. If Ezra wasn't sick — She had tried to be patient with him. When he lay groaning with pain at night, she had rubbed his hands and his arms until her fingers ached. When he was discouraged, she had tried to be cheerful. She had kept silent when he was more unreasonable than a child. She had reminded Howard, when the boy chafed under abuse, that his father was sick and he mustn't mind what he said. Yes, she tried. But in the end, nothing had done any good.

The swallows dipped in and out of the barn, twit-

tering softly. A hen cackled over a new egg. A calf whimpered for its mother. But suddenly another sound, coming from the half-empty hay-mow on the other side, it seemed, startled her. Rachel listened. Then she took a step forward. Again it was repeated, an awful sound of some one in an agony of distress. She climbed up the cross beams which confined the hay and peered through the shadows. There on a pile of hay a few yards away lay Ezra. He did not hear her. He lay in a crumpled heap, his face downward, buried in his hands, sobbing as only a man sobs who loses his self-control once or twice in a life-time.

Rachel hesitated. Howard, a baby, a romping little boy, seemed to cling to her. Her hand went up to her throat. She took a step backward, and as she turned away, the rubber-tired buggy in its shroud-like wrappings confronted her. All at once she knew. It wasn't the rubber-tired buggy that Ezra jealously guarded. It was the prosperity and the happiness for which it stood. Other farmers along the river worked hard and made money. They bought the automobiles which had made an end to the fancy driving horses of Ezra's good years. But Ezra worked hard and reaped repeated disasters. Now, sick and discouraged, he had nothing but the rubber-tired buggy.

Rachel went to him. She knelt down in the hay, leaning over him, her hands on his hair.

"I've lost my boy," he sobbed. "I've drove him off from home. Rachel, how can you stand to come near me?"

She noticed how thin he was and how tired, a wreck of what he had been only a year ago. And yet even now, with the gray in his hair and the lines in his face, there was something boyish about him, something that was younger than Howard. It was that which helped her. The tenderness of her young motherhood, when she had something weak to protect from the world, came back to her now.

She took him in her arms, his head on her shoulder. She wiped his face with her apron and rubbed his hands. "My dear, my dear," she kept saying, as if he were a little child.

"Rachel, I can't ask you to forgive me this time," he sobbed.

His words brought the tears to her eyes. She realized now that she would always forgive him, that she loved him still, that she always would. She felt ashamed, as if she were a traitor to her motherhood, because she was leaving Howard to work out his own future alone.

She went on rubbing the weary hands. Yes, she would stay with him. She would stay. Something would help her to stand it all.

"Rachel—I—" he stammered, grasping her hand, "I'm goin' to town. I—I'll beg him—I—I'll do anything to bring him back to you."

New hope shone through her tears. "No, I'll go," she said. "I want to go. I'll start right away. An' I'll bring him back, Ezra," she promised.

He rose unsteadily. "I'll hitch up old Frank. An' you—you'd better take the rubber-tired buggy."

Together they pushed the buggy out of the barn. Ezra tried to remove the canvas cover, but Rachel had to help his shaking hands. Then she started toward the house to change her dress for the journey, while Ezra went back to the stable for Frank.

As she walked along, her lips moved. "I'll bring him back — bring him back — bring him back," she said over and over again, like a child repeating a difficult lesson.

He was a soft-hearted boy. She would tell him that his father needed him, that she could not live without him. And he would come home.

When she crossed the road, she was aware of a cloud of dust in front of her and a gray figure approaching. Unconsciously she stopped.

"Mother —"

It was Howard. A thick crust of dust had settled over his shoes, over the blue coat, over his round, felt hat. She stood looking at him, as if he were only the phantom of her prayers and her hopes.

"Howard," she said at last, "you?"

"I've come back to stick it out, mother," he said. In his blue eyes there was the solemnity of a sacred vow. "To stick it out," he repeated, his lips halting wearily over the words.

His arms were around her, his strength and his youth like a fresh morning breeze after all she had suffered.

"I couldn't go as far as town," he confessed to her. "I had to come back."

"Go tell your father," she whispered, pointing to the barn.

Rachel did not trust herself to go with him. She went on toward home, a few resolute hens in a procession at her heels. Near the house she almost ran, past the rose-bushes, up the porch steps, across the dining-room floor.

In the shelter of her room, she threw herself upon the bed. In this place, hallowed by a confusion of memories, she knew that in some mysterious fashion the joy of the years when the rubber-tired buggy was new had returned to her. And yet it was not the same joy. It was something suffered for and won, won never to be lost again.

Song

By GLENN WARD DRESBACH

I would not marry you again
If you came back to live once more
Upon the World, and with strange pain
I would pass by your door.

For I could not forget you died
And that my love no more had worth —
Could not forget, although I tried,
Your bridal night with Earth.

The Soul That Sinneth

The soul that sinneth, it shall die.

EZEKIEL 18: 4.

By EMA S. HUNTING

Henry Schultz drove into the yard and unhitched the team from the plough. It was coming sunset already—the dusty, cool October sunset that so early sent him in from the fields. In the meadow back of the barn which they had never been able to drain because there was no place lower to drain into, innumerable frogs croaked and chorused. Visitors from towns had sometimes found the sound dreary coming through the hush and low wind of twilight: and indeed Henry thought it unpleasant since it reminded him of the half acre of waste land his ditches and tiles could not make profitable. But in the main, he paid no more attention to the frogs than he paid to the colors in the level, deep prairie sunsets, or to the scent of rank vegetation, past its prime, from the roadsides. He smelled the sweat on his team, and the odor from the open barn, partly of animals and partly from the hay and grains stored there, and he caught from the house a whiff of potatoes frying in fat.

He drove the liberated team over to the trough to drink. After that they must be fed and bedded, this team and two other teams and Johnny's driving horse besides. Then there was the milking and the separating and the pigs. It was dark, with a cold

whisper of wind in the trees, when he turned towards the house.

He was a humane man, Henry Schultz, and fed his animals before he fed himself, or before his wife could eat or get her work put aside. A silent man, partly deaf, who drove regularly to church on Sundays, seldom spoke, and for recreation improvised chords and modulations on the reed organ in the parlor, evenings and Sunday afternoons. He owned three farms: but the last one, the one in Minnesota where land was still cheaper than in Iowa, that would be a long while getting paid for now that he had everything to do alone and might even have to hire a man.

He stood at the bench outside the kitchen door where there was a pail of water, a tin dipper and basin, and took a long drink of the cool, deep well water tasting of iron. Everything to do — yes, just when Johnny was getting over his nonsense and settling down into some help to a man. The girls, of course, that was natural — girls get married and go and what can you say? Besides, Carrie managed the work by herself: but how could he manage one hundred and sixty acres, and the cattle and the pigs, and the cream to haul, and the repairing, and all? How could any man? He had never thought so much of Johnny's help, always talking about school and machinery, and driving that Klinefelter girl to church — a little fellow, anyhow, short in the legs: it was a wonder they took him. But of course they would take him, take *his* boy, the only one he had to do anything. He stood by the bench with the water

running out of the dipper beside him and stared at the grey sky where the sun had long disappeared. In Texas, they said he was, a big camp, thousands of young chaps he had written his mother. Well, let them go, the thousands, if they wanted to be fools: but let them let *him* alone, him and his, his acres and his barns and his boy.

The frogs were quiet, but the cottonwoods in the grove bent and thrashed and shed their dry leaves on the wind.

He poured water into the basin and splashed face and hands, and groped his way into the kitchen to dry on the towel behind the door.

There was no light in the kitchen except the glow in the cook stove and a bar of yellow in the slit of the dining room door. Supper was waiting, pushed back to keep hot, but Carrie might have been there watching for him. He took up the comb hanging on a chain beside the towel and combed his wet hair. He could hear the rockers of a chair in the next room, rocking, rocking on the bare floor. That was the grandmother, too old to do anything, sitting as she always sat, waiting to be fed. He dropped the comb and pushed open the room door.

A lamp with a white china shade stood on the supper table throwing yellow light in a circle across the dishes and the red and white table cloth and leaving the room dim. The grandmother sat in her corner, not rocking now, sitting still like a cat. He could see her face peering at him. Even then he did not speak, did not say, "Where's Carrie?" nor shout for

her as another man might have done. It was true he was ready for his supper after a hard day's work —

He saw the door of the parlor open and his wife look at him. She too said nothing. But he saw that she was white with swollen patches of red about her eyes. She had something — a bit of paper — in her hand.

Then he spoke. He said, "What's the matter?" She made a little sound in her throat, but it was not a word, and gave him the yellow paper: and even then, instead of going into the kitchen, she went back into the parlor and pulled the door shut.

He carried the paper to the table and sat down and began reading it, held close to the light.

Private John Schultz — of pneumonia — October 6 —

There was not a sound from the grandmother, not a sound from the parlor, not a sound from the man at the table reading —

And then there came a cry, and an awful curse, and a blow that set the lampshade rattling and the light flickering in the room.

"You!" he screamed at the grandmother. "Here eleven years and worth nothing. You there in your corner, hanging on, and Johnny dead. Dead." He ran out of the room, and through the kitchen, and in the yard they could hear him, screaming.

Carrie crept in from the parlor and touched her mother.

"Kommen Sie mit, ma. Go to bett."

"Ja. Ja. I go. I go." She scrambled up and

clung to her daughter and they went through the dark, shut parlor to the bedroom. The pipes of the reed organ gleamed with gilt in the corner. Their feet were noiseless on the ingrain carpet padded underneath with straw.

"At Carl's," whispered the Grandmother, "there are the children, so many. Und seine Frau — but I go, I go there. Ich denke —"

"Ja. But never mind tonight, ma. Go to bett."

"Ja, zum bett. I go."

All night, at times Carrie heard him: but in the morning he came in to his breakfast, fed in silence, and went out to the chores and the ploughing. She carried him his lunch and put it down in the corner of the field, and she swept and burnished the house, and called up her two daughters on their farms to tell them.

"Johnny?" they said. "But, ma — he just went! *Johnny?* Oh, ma!"

"Yes. But don't come over tonight. Wait a day or two." She knew the neighbors would be listening in — "rubbering." "There's to be a big funeral. The telegram said so. An escort of honor. They are coming with him all the way from Texas."

"Oh, ma! With Johnny!"

"He was a soldier already. I swept today and tomorrow I'll bake up some biscuit."

"We'll come to help you."

"Yes. But not tomorrow. Wait a day or two."

In spite of Carrie, whispers ran about the neighborhood. Henry Schultz was crazed. All day he ploughed in his fields while Johnny lay dead. Old

Grandma Haar was to be sent to her son's, nine miles away, where there were seven children and the farm was poor. She would die there, they said. Henry had pulled down the flag from the window and burned it.

"No one but May Klinefelter has dared go near the place," they whispered. "It looks funny, her not married to Johnny. But she went over to help Carrie while Henry ploughed in the south eighty."

Then a rumour from the village. Henry Schultz had telegraphed to the camp in Texas that he would have no soldiers with the body. They would have come — an escort of honor for Johnny Schultz, two weeks a soldier. Now there would be no one.

Few dared, when the coffin arrived draped in the flag, one young officer its sole escort, few dared go to the Schultz place for the funeral. The two girls, Annie and Linda, were there as in duty bound, with their husbands, and James McGovern, the only Scotchman in the county, came stumping fiercely on his lame leg. Carrie had fitted herself out in black, and the grandmother was still there, mumbling and shrinking into her bonnet. The house was shining and ready, with a row of chairs set 'round the parlor. But the wagon with the coffin had driven down the long lane between the cottonwoods and the young officer had stepped out on the porch, and the men from town who had volunteered as pall bearers were just ready to lift the body, before Henry Schultz appeared. He came around the corner of the porch in his overalls and boots. He said terrible things to

the young officer. He tore the great flag from the coffin and trampled it and threw it away. And then he went back again to his field and ploughed all day until dark.

The young officer was very kind. He put his arm around Carrie and took her into the house, and when they brought in the coffin, he held her while she looked at Johnny. And Johnny lay white and smiling in his uniform, not at all thin for he had been sick only four days, with his big blue eyes just closed and his brown hair brushed back from his forehead.

It was three days later when the insurance man from town, Art Fedderman, drove out to settle about Johnny's insurance. There was a thousand dollars coming for Johnny. Art brought the new lawyer, young Harvey, with him. Art was getting pretty fat and puffy what with big land deals and maybe a bottle under the seat, and perhaps he didn't care about coming alone.

Carrie told him Henry was in the barn mending harness — it was rainy that day — and sure enough, there they found him with the golden dust from the mows sifting around him.

"Well, Mr. Schultz, this is too bad," said Art.
"It's too bad."

"What do you want?"

"Why — the insurance, you know, Mr. Schultz. Johnny's insurance."

"Then say the insurance, the thousand dollars. Three days in his grave and you just getting here."

"My God, three days, Mr. Schultz! Is there an-

other company, only but just the Mutual, that comes around with a check in three days?"

"Then let's see the check."

They settled somehow about the insurance—young Harvey took himself off to the car—and Art came out of the barn looking mottled and shaky and was for driving straight off. But Carrie called to them to come in to dinner—it was past noon and raining—and young Harvey said, "Better take a bite. You look done."

They ate alone at the table in the dining room with the grandmother shriveled in her corner and Carrie waiting on them, back and forth, between the table and the stove in the kitchen. Art kept a lookout through the window toward the barn: and even when they were through and going out to the car, he said in a whisper, "Start her up, Harve. I want to get out of here."

"What's the matter?" young Harvey asked as they turned out of the lane of cottonwoods on the public road. "Out of his head?"

"Is he? Say, he darned near put me out of mine. What d'you think he thinks this check is I brought him from the Mutual—twenty payment life he carried for the kid? Thinks it's Gov'ment money. Got it all mixed up with War Risk Insurance and that stuff. Laughed his head off—d'you hear him? My land, the barn shook. 'Two weeks they had him,' he says, 'and it cost 'em a thousand dollars! And it's not for his mother,' he says. 'Don't you believe that.' Raved around about Johnny's being mur-

dered. 'Stole him, stole him!' he yelled. Turned a man's blood cold. And then, by George, if he wasn't going to strangle me getting me to promise I wouldn't tell he had the money. Said the Red Cross and that gang would be right on him, and he had to pay for Johnny's farm — some deal he had on up in Minnesota. Kept on telling how poor he is, how he has to work now Johnny's gone. Oh, he's a bug all right! And yet, you know — poor old nut — a man feels sorry for him." The car slid around another turn in the road, and Art, recovering, became reflective. "Yes, sir, he must have thought a lot more of that kid than anybody knew about. Kept talking about his legs. Says his mother says he worked too hard when he was a kid and it made him short. And if he hasn't got it half in his head the kid ain't dead! Yes — told me a dozen times. 'They're hiding him,' he says, 'his mother and that Klinefelter girl. They've sneaked him off to school. Always at me about school — school.' Smart boy, Johnny Schultz was. Well —" Art sighed and reached a fat hand under the seat. "Poor devil, it's his own loss. But I'd hate to live with him."

"Yes."

And the two fell silent: not thinking perhaps of the lost crazed man in the barn, sitting in his rain of golden dust: but of Carrie going back and forth, back and forth, between the table and the kitchen stove: and of the grandmother mumbling in her corner. And of the silence in the house, and the long cold winds in the cottonwoods.

